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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay


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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

### Abstract

The key to leadership is confidence: not only in yourself, but those around you to get the job done to your satisfaction. Good leaders surround themselves with good people to whom they can delegate responsibility to and trust that it will be done satisfactorily. Leaders must not only bask in the glow of success, but also bathe in the spotlight of failure, readily admitting fault when necessary.

A quality leader possesses good motivational skills and is adept at "handling" people. In my experiences, good leaders remain calm under pressure and are constantly striving to improve not only themselves, but also those around them. An effective leader has a great influence over their organization and sets the tone for others, which can be either positive or negative. Although many people have developed leadership skills through training, I believe that most good leaders have an innate drive or skill for leadership.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Todd M. Coulter

May 2004

Dr. Robert Decker

This Research Paper by: Todd M. Coulter

Entitled: WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Robert H. Decker

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Date Approved

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I initially did not start out to be an educator, I just thought that a physical education degree would be relatively easy, which it was not, and that as long as I had some sort of degree, my life would be great and people would beat a path to my door to hire me for some high paying job. How wrong I was! As I got closer to graduation I realized that I really did want to be an educator and now had some remorse for not fully applying myself in the early stages of my course work. I was now concerned if I would be qualified to get a job. Physical education jobs are hard to come by, but fortunately for me, I have been in the right place at the right time, three times in six years. Those circumstances have helped prove to me that I am doing what I was meant to do all along.

I truly enjoy being a physical education teacher. Getting students motivated to be active is challenging especially when those students are used to sitting in front of the great brain drain: the television! Teaching a student how to shoot a basketball correctly or seeing a kindergarten student hit a wiffle ball that I have pitched to her for the first time provides me with great satisfaction. I have always been active in athletics and now I have that opportunity on a daily basis, and get paid for it!

I believe that all children can learn. I do not believe all children can learn the same things or at the same rate. Students are highly sophisticated little machines that come to us with many variables that affect how, what, and when they learn. I believe that students want to learn; some of them just need to find

some form of motivation to get them pointed in the right direction. That motivation can come from their parents, a favorite teacher or some intrinsic desire to do well. One thing that people fail to understand is that education takes place everywhere, not just in this physical structure called school. Students are very observant and impressionable, what they see an adult do makes a huge impact on them, either right or wrong! As educators we must constantly be aware that someone is always watching us and learning from how we react or respond to different situations. We are role models wherever we go!

Education should be an interactive experience. It has been shown that students learn best when they are actively engaged in what is taking place around them. Students do not learn best in a college-type lecture environment. The more experiences that students can take part in, the more thoroughly they will learn from those experiences. Receiving an education should be a challenge, even for the youngest learner. I believe we do students an injustice when we make things easy for them just so they can “pass”.

Unfortunately we live in a world of turmoil and potential disaster. In order for our way of life to survive, we must educate our children, for it is they who will some day lead the world. Our fate is very much in their hands, are we doing enough to prepare them for that responsibility? Of all the great things our nation does, providing a free, high quality public education is one of the most critical things we do for our children.

I really enjoy being a physical education teacher. I get to wear shorts and sweats to school every day and I get to teach kids how to play. What a great job! I now want more than that from my career and that is why I have chosen to become an educational leader. Often times the physical education teachers are left alone and thought of as the place kids go so that the other teachers can have their planning period. There has been a couple of occasions that the only time a teacher has talked to me is when they needed the gym for some assembly or program of some sort. In three years as an elementary physical education teacher, not one time was I invited into the classroom to observe what takes place or to teach a lesson myself, even after offering.

From the examples above, I decided the best way to get involved and learn about what takes place in other areas of school is to become the person who helps set the agenda for the school. I am a naturally curious person who likes to know what is going on around me. Also, I am not one to back down from a challenge and I believe leading a school is quite possibly one of the biggest challenges a person can take on. It may be arrogance, but I feel like I can do the job.

I feel the key to leadership is confidence: not only in yourself, but those around you to get the job done to your satisfaction. Good leaders surround themselves with good people to whom they can delegate responsibility to and trust that it will be done satisfactorily. Leaders must not only bask in the glow of success, but also bathe in the spotlight of failure, readily admitting fault when

necessary. A quality leader possesses good motivational skills and is adept at “handling” people. In my experiences, good leaders remain calm under pressure and are constantly striving to improve not only themselves, but also those around them. An effective leader has a great influence over their organization and sets the tone for others, which can be either positive or negative. Although many people have developed leadership skills through training, I believe that most good leaders have an innate drive or skill for leadership.

As we have progressed through this program there have been ample opportunities to reflect on why I want to be a school leader. I do not know that there is a solid reason other than it just feels right. I have witnessed how other school leaders have handled their positions and I just feel as though I can do the job. I certainly have become more observant of how administrators handle different situations so that I may also assess how I would handle various situations as well. I have found many instances of both agreement and disagreement with how a situation has been handled, but each person has their own style and way of handling issues that arise. As I progress through my course work and practicum experiences, my own personal style will evolve to help prepare me for my first school leadership position, which I anxiously look forward to.

I have chosen stress management, curricular leadership, personnel management, and school culture as four critical elements I deem crucial to my



success as a school leader. Each critical element reflects an area in which I feel I must be very adept at in order to be a productive school leader. The subjects appear in the order listed above because of their importance to my ability to perform my job successfully. If I am able to properly handle and manage the daily stress that occurs, I will be a better manager and have the time to hire and mentor quality personnel. Hiring quality personnel allows more time to serve as the building curriculum leader as opposed to disciplinarian due to good teachers managing their classrooms properly. Good teaching and quality curriculum lead to increased student achievement, which has a positive effect on school culture. Finally, when all of these elements fit cohesively together, the daily stresses will then be minimized because teachers are teaching and students are learning.

Each of these four critical elements is related to at least one of the six leadership standards we must show competence in to graduate. I have chosen to relate stress management with Standard 5 due to the ethical issues that can arise when over-stressed administrators are faced with tough decisions that can ultimately question their integrity and fairness. Curricular leadership is represented by Standard 1, which has a focus of visionary leadership. An administrator that takes the lead as the instructional leader of a building must work to align curriculum with the school and district goals. Hiring quality personnel is a key aspect of Standard 3. Standard 3 relates to the operation of a safe, efficient learning environment for students and teachers. Quality teachers

operate safe classrooms, thereby allowing students to learn in an environment that promotes high achievement. Finally, Standard 2 represents school culture with the emphasis on an educational environment conducive to learning.

### **Standard 5: Ethical Leadership and Integrity**

A school administrator is an educational leader who ensures the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner (Wilmore, 2002). It is in this standard that I believe stress management is most related to. As an administrator becomes increasingly over-stressed due to the demands of the position, the decision-making process can become more reactionary, as opposed too reflective. Reactionary decisions are more likely to be done emotionally thereby potentially calling in to question the administrator's integrity or ethical beliefs. Administrators that engage in sound stress management practices are less likely to respond emotionally, but will take the time to reflect on the most ethical and fair decision for all involved.

Stress is a killer disease (Monteiro, 1990). A career as a school administrator can be very stressful. Therefore, if a school administrator does not learn to manage and deal with the stress of the job properly, many negative consequences may occur, both professionally and personally. My ability to handle the day-to-day issues that arise will likely be a factor in determining the long-term success of my administrative career. If I am able to maintain my health

and not let the stresses of the job overwhelm me, I will be a much more effective administrator.

When people think of the term stress, negative images immediately come to mind. Chronic worrying, irritability, and nervousness are all characteristics of negative stress. Hans Selye (1974) introduced the term eustress to describe stress that has a positive effect. An example of eustress would be that of the first feelings of falling in love with someone. Whether the body undergoes morbid changes or experiences intense pleasure, the cumulative effect of all the wear and tear on it is draining (Monteiro, 1990). The body is punished by stress (Monteiro, 1990).

Stress comes from many sources. Our work environment, home life, fitness level, and diet are just a few of the factors that determine our stress level. Sources of stress often go unnoticed (Brock & Grady, 2002). Brock & Grady (2002) believe stress is a constant factor of life. As humans we need some stress just to be productive in the day-to-day function of living. Too much stress is destructive. The art of stress management is to maintain a level of healthy, enjoyable, and productive stimulation (Brock & Grady, 2002).

Depending on what studies you read, most will tell you that nearly 40 to 50 percent of all diseases are stress related. Learning to recognize excess stress and then handling the stress properly is crucial to help ward off some of those diseases. Brock & Grady (2002) conclude that the first sign of overstress is the

inability to obtain a restful sleep. When a person is constantly tired nothing is fun due to the lack of energy needed to actively participate. Science has shown that when we are chronically fatigued, our immune system becomes weaker and therefore makes us more susceptible to illness and disease. We are also more prone to make poor decisions due to the inability to concentrate or think clearly. Being a good school administrator is not a Monday through Friday nine to five job. This career requires long days and busy weekends and often blurs the line between home and work. One administrator I know goes to the locker room everyday at 1:15 in the afternoon for fifteen minutes of light exercise and quiet meditation. This small time period allows him to clear his mind and rejuvenate his body for the rest of the day ahead. I believe this is a worthwhile practice and one that I may potentially try to incorporate into my daily routine.

Whoever said laughter is the best medicine really is not too far from the truth. Humor, although taken for granted, is an essential part of life (Brock & Grady, 2002). Laughter has many physiological benefits such as: increased oxygen in the blood, exercises the lungs, diaphragm and facial muscles, causes the pulse to drop and increases the production of endorphins which are hormones the body releases to make us feel better. I believe that if you are not getting 3 or 4 good belly laughs daily at school you are not trying very hard. Kids are funny and it is OK to laugh at some of the things they say and do. Most importantly, we must be able to laugh at ourselves. Laughter can be a great tension diffuser at

tense, critical moments. When you bend over in the cafeteria and your pants split that really is funny so just laugh right along with everyone else and then go find some more pants! Being able to laugh at our self shows a personal side that colleagues and students do not often get to see from us.

Good time management and organizational skills are crucial to handling the daily operations of a school and minimizing the stress created from those operations. By their nature, schools are fertile grounds for conflict (Lyons, 1990). How an administrator responds to those daily conflicts will be a key determinant of long-term administrative success. Emotional reactions are more likely to negative and thus bring in to question the integrity of the administrator. A good administrator does not crumble when a plan falls apart, but rather has the ability to adapt to the new circumstances and still generate a positive outcome. I believe trouble shooting and thinking on the move are two of my strongest characteristics. I enjoy the challenge of solving immediate, unforeseen problems and I am sure I will encounter my fair share as an administrator.

Being the leader of a school inherently creates some very high expectations from people. Staff members will expect and demand immediate results. Principals and assistant principals have to be decisive; that is, they have to know what needs to be done and persuade people to follow their lead (Matthews & Crow, 2003). If I as principal panic or show distress in a crisis, that image and feeling is going to carry over into my relationships with colleagues and

create doubt in their mind about my ability to lead our school. As people begin to question my ability to lead, increased challenges to my integrity and fairness will also arise. Effective leaders do not allow this to happen.

A clean desk speaks volumes. In addition, a tidy office projects a sense of professionalism that builds trust and tells visitors and personnel that you are in charge (Brock & Grady, 2002). Although I am not the most organized person, I am making a concerted effort to improve in anticipation of my future role as an administrator. I now utilize a daily planner, have files for paperwork and I keep my desk area clean. I believe these small steps will eventually help me become better organized. Any little thing that can be done to remove unnecessary stressors is a positive step.

Finally, one of the biggest stressors we face is procrastination. Granted some tasks are unpleasant, but putting them off only creates unneeded stress, as unpleasant as it may be, to borrow a line from Nike, we should "just do it"! I have found that the quicker I do the unpleasant jobs, the easier and more relaxing it is to stay motivated to get other tasks done as well. Apparently it all comes down to prioritizing what needs to be done and when it needs to be done. As a former supervisor from Hy-Vee used to tell me frequently: work smarter, not harder. I am now really beginning to understand the value in that statement.

Sometimes the principal has little to show at the end of the day other than the peace that has been restored/maintained (Lyons, 1990). I believe this is a

powerful statement. Perseverance is crucial to our success. In order to persevere I must, in the words of Stephen Covey (1989) continually sharpen the saw. This philosophy refers to not only persevering, but also thriving and enhancing life. No one can do this for us; we must take initiative and responsibility ourselves. Mr. Covey breaks this philosophy down into four dimensions: physical, spiritual, mental, and social/emotional.

The physical dimension involves caring effectively for our physical body-eating the right kinds of foods, getting sufficient rest and relaxation, and exercising on a regular basis (Covey, 1989). Two years ago I was really into a good exercise routine. I was weight training regularly, eating better and losing some significant weight. As a result I felt better physically than I had in 10 years. Unfortunately I changed schools last year, broke my routine and have lost all gains previously made. Since that time it has been a struggle to establish a consistent routine. I must find it in me to make that commitment to my health again. Covey (1989) then states:

As you increase your body's ability to do more demanding things, you'll find your normal activities much more comfortable and pleasant. You'll have more afternoon energy, and the fatigue you've felt that has made you "too tired" to exercise in the past will be replaced by an energy that will invigorate everything you do.

Being in good shape physically will ease the strain and help my body react positively to the stressors I will face daily, and also help to keep me mentally sharp as well.

I must start by saying that I am not a spiritual person in the truest sense of the word. I do attend church weekly with my family but it is more out of respect for my wife and being a good model for my young children. I enjoy my time at church I just do not feel moved or compelled at this time to delve deeper looking for meaning or guidance. I know what I believe and how I want to live my life and try to practice that daily. For me a spiritual event is hearing an old song that stirs fond memories, taking a quiet walk with my wife or simply playing with our young children. The joy they display reaffirms my primary mission: to be a good husband and father. Keeping this in perspective really helps me shake off a bad day at school and in return, walk into my house each day with a smile on my face and a hug for everyone.

The mental dimension refers to life long learning. We must constantly challenge ourselves to learn new things, and not just inside our chosen career. Spending time engaged in the reading of a good book helps us to potentially learn new strategies we may utilize. Time spent reading and writing analytically helps us to sharpen our communication skills. For stress relief I am not advocating the reading of War and Peace, but rather an enjoyable book read in a comfortable spot that helps transform you from the here and now, to the setting of the book.



Getting lost in a good book is a great way to lose the stress of a tough day at school.

Finally, the social/emotional dimension is centered on the principles of interpersonal leadership, empathic communication, and creative cooperation (Covey, 1989). I believe a great example of having a positive and engaged social/emotional dimension is my parents. My parents have a wide circle of friends and actively seek out opportunities to get together. I admire this about them. Although both parents work, money has never been overly plentiful for them. From simple backyard barbeques and pool parties, to weekend day trips to pick apples in the fall, they find the joy in the “simple” things. This past fall at an Iowa football game my dad and I were talking about this huge motor home and the people standing near it when he said, “they may have more money than us, but I bet we have more fun”! I found that comment to be very powerful because I think it shows that they appreciate what their life has to offer to themselves, their friends and their family.

Having outlets and activities to occupy my free time will be a great way to leave the stress of school at school. By nature I think teachers are social people who like to be around other people. I enjoy my time at school, but also look forward to going home at the end the day. I enjoy my interactions with students and staff. Just being able to laugh and enjoy the relationships that I have formed help me deal with the daily stressors that I encounter. I guess it simply means

this: if I am good to others they in turn will be good to me. This may be a touch naïve, but I really try to follow this philosophy. Always keeping this in mind will help me deal with the stresses of being a school administrator.

I understand that this career is loaded with built in stress. An administrator's reputation and career can hang in the balance of how that stress is maintained. Poor decisions based on emotional reactions can ruin a reputation and career instantly. Without our integrity, we have nothing. Ultimately, individuals are responsible for handling stress in a way that personally benefits them the most. I believe that I have some good preliminary mechanisms in place that help me deal with stress proactively. Acknowledging stress is the key to dealing with it. Stress is constant. Stress can be handled. Stress is not a subject for "weak leaders" but a challenge that can make strong leaders even stronger (Monteiro, 1990).

### **Standard 1: Curricular Leadership**

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Wilmore, 2002).

I believe in order to be an effective educational leader, the principal must be an active player in all curricular areas of the school. By this I do not suggest the principal must be an expert in all areas, but rather possess an awareness of all

curriculum and how they are to be implemented, taught, and assessed. In my teaching experience very few of my administrators have appeared to be heavily involved with curriculum, but rather spent their time with technology, personnel, and discipline out of necessity. Even when principals are generally aware of their curriculum responsibilities, they have difficulty finding time to execute the role (Glatthorn 2000). Principals must have a larger vision and see the whole curriculum (Cunningham & Cordeiro 2003).

Currently I am a middle school physical education teacher. I began my teaching career six years ago teaching middle school health education in a classroom. I have rarely been in a classroom since. Therefore I have very little understanding of what curriculums are currently being used aside from the names of the classes themselves. I have no experience with new learning and teaching strategies that are currently being used. As a future administrator it must become a priority for me to visit and observe in more classrooms so I can be somewhat aware of what is being taught in my building. At this time the only exposure I have to curriculum issues is by attending staff development workshops away from my curricular area. With reading being the number one priority for the Waterloo Community Schools, gaining knowledge in the reading curriculum is a must. Since beginning this program I have made progress towards understanding all that is taking place in other areas by becoming a member of our building leadership team and data team.

An effective principal should not only be aware of what is being taught but also how it aligns with the School Improvement Plan and district goals. Much research and reflection should occur before a school or district adopts any new curriculum. Careful thought should be employed to ensure the decision flows toward the end result of higher student achievement. I also believe if a new curriculum concept is introduced, teachers and administrators must receive the proper amounts of training necessary to implement the curriculum properly. When a new concept or operating procedure is implemented in other professions the employees are given training, so why then should teachers receive little to no training for their new concepts or operating procedures? As stakeholders in the success of the learning environment, the district must implement processes that will ensure that each school has the resources it needs to implement curricula effectively (Glatthorn 2000).

Without proper evaluation whose job will it be to determine if the curriculum is effective? As Glatthorn (2000) notes, each curriculum guide should be evaluated once it has been completed, there should be a pilot test to see how the new guide works in practice, and the new curriculum should be evaluated during the first full year of implementation. I would also add that student achievement should be closely scrutinized along with teacher satisfaction with the new curriculum. I strongly believe it is my role as the principal to see that these tasks are done for each curricular area of the school. Certainly this is a

daunting task, but one that is crucial to ensure student success, staff satisfaction, and the success of my principalship towards meeting the goals and mission of the district. To fulfill this expectation, the administrator must understand how to plan, organize, and evaluate the content of school programs (Kowalski & Reitzug 1993).

In order to be a successful curriculum driven principal, I must be visible and active in classrooms all over the school. Students and staff must know that I am concerned with the material being taught, and why the material is even being taught at our school. Too often the principal is viewed as the problem solver and not as a former teacher who still has an interest in curriculum and seeing students and teachers succeed. Principals must challenge and encourage teachers to try new ideas or concepts, even to the point of being the lead person in a new teaching style. If it takes the principal being the guinea pig for a new concept, so be it! Teachers must be made to feel competent and appreciated so that they will always work to fine tune their craft. I believe that both teachers and students will rise to the occasion when the bar is raised. Expect excellence and excellence will be achieved! The effective principal is actively involved in all aspects of the instructional program, sets expectations for continuous improvement and collegiality, models the kinds of behaviors desired, participates in in-service training with the teachers, and consistently gives priority to instructional concerns (Smith & Andrews 1989). A strong visionary leader spreads the news of success

to the greater learning community to help foster the development and growth of new relationships.

One key aspect of curriculum leadership that must not be overlooked is that of parental involvement. Parents must be kept informed of what is being taught in the classroom. If there are special areas of concern, parents must be notified. As an administrator I do not want any surprises! I believe that parents need to be involved with curriculum decisions to some extent, but not to the point that they dictate curriculum. Curriculum must reflect the vision of the district, not the desires of the parents. Family members are given opportunities to provide ideas and advise just as educators are (Cunningham & Cordeiro 2003). I want parents to be involved, not in control. Our school and community goal should be about always increasing student achievement, not trying to please every parent.

While trying to find a specific standard to relate curriculum leadership with, it is quickly apparent that sound curriculum and curricular decisions must be the driving force in education. It is for this reason that I believe curricular leadership is most aligned with Standard 1 and visionary leadership. Without a strong curricular leader I feel a school will have a hard time establishing a clear vision of where the school wants to go. Without vision, the school will flounder and become stagnant, which in turn becomes a pretty uninspiring place to be every day. My goal is to never let that happen in any school that I may work in.

In today's school there are so many issues that were never present even when I went to high school in the mid 1980's. School violence consisted of fistfights in the parking lot after a game. Teen pregnancy was rare and looked upon with some disgrace; today some high schools have day-care centers. Even though we did not care for taking standardized tests, we usually did our best just to brag to our friends about how smart we were and to meet the expectations of our parents. Technology updates consisted of getting a new calculator for math every year, now some students bring their own laptops to school, clearly schools have changed!

With so much riding on student achievement because of the No Child Left Behind legislation, curriculum concerns must be addressed by the educational leader of the school. That person will be me! Obviously I have much work to do before I am ready for a leadership role, so in that lag time I must find ways to become more knowledgeable about curricular issues and teaching strategies. We are all stakeholders in determining our future, not just as a public school system, but also as Americans living in a democratic society. Now more than ever our future is at risk, but I believe the better prepared our students are when they leave school the more likely it will be that our society will not only survive, but also continue to thrive and prosper.

### **Standard 3: Personnel Management**

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Wilmore, 2002). Most personnel decisions have either a direct or indirect impact on the quality of instruction (Seyfarth, 2002). I believe this to be a very accurate statement. Hiring a poor teacher is going to have an almost immediate negative effect on the climate of that particular classroom, and eventually the entire school. With so much of a school's success currently based on test score results, it is more crucial than ever before to hire good teachers that enjoy both their job and their students. Sound decision-making is a top priority in leading an efficient school (Wilmore, 2002).

Principals and supervisors must create conditions in schools that facilitate teacher's work and help them to achieve success (Seyfarth, 2002). Ultimately, when a principal hires a poor teacher, that decision reflects poorly on the principal who is ultimately responsible for all student achievement in a school. Bad teachers make the job of a principal very difficult so it would best serve the principal to hire well. School operations must continually be assessed for effectiveness and efficiency, including personnel (Wilmore, 2002).

Clearly, capable teachers are essential to achieving quality education and that such teachers will always be in short supply (Seyfarth, 2002). The focus of



this section shall be on candidate selection, interviewing, and mentoring of new teachers. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but rather an overview of some critical thoughts I have on the process of hiring and developing good teachers.

In order to select the best individuals for a position, a job description must first be developed to explain the requirements and duties of the position.

Following the job description allows the screening committee to select interview candidates that best fit the position available. Selecting school personnel involves matching applicant qualifications to selection criteria (Seyfarth, 2002). Operating in this manner is legally safe and an ethically sound practice because it eliminates the “good old boy” network in most cases. Quite simply, if you do not best match the job description, you most likely will not be granted an interview.

If you hire a problem, eventually you have to fire the problem, so it would be best practice to make careful hiring decisions from the onset. The selection process presents one of the quickest ways to initiate change and improvement in the services of a school organization (Webb & Norton, 1998). Nearly all school positions are there to serve one purpose: educating children. Teachers are hired to help students learn (Seyfarth, 2002). If a teacher brings their own agenda to school aside from educating students, it is the job of the principal to help that teacher realign that agenda or find a new and more suitable career. Bad teachers typically lack proper classroom management skills, thus creating an unsafe learning environment for students. Bad teachers can have huge negative impacts

on staff in a very short time: they must go. The overriding objective of the selection process is to select the candidate that most effectively possesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully help students learn. A school is a team, whether it functions as one or not (Thompson, 1996). It is our duty to students to select candidates who will be good teammates.

A well-organized resume and cover letter can provide a lot of valuable factual information about a candidate, but a personal interview is crucial to hiring a good teacher. Interviewing is not an easy task for anyone involved. Stress is particularly great at the beginning of the interview, and careful efforts should be made at that time to put the applicant at ease (Norton & Webb, 1998). Making a person comfortable allows that person to let their true self come through, which provides the interview team with better information with which to base a decision.

In order to be fair to all candidates, questions should be job relevant, and the same questions should be asked of all candidates (Seyfarth, 2002). If this is not done, the interview is essentially measuring apples and oranges because there is no firm basis upon which to make the decision. Granted, some responses will elicit follow up questions, but all base questions should be the same.

Pay attention to the interviewee. One of the most difficult yet important skills to learn is listening (Norton & Webb, 1998). Careful listening allows the interviewer to ask insightful questions from issues raised. The interviewer must be somewhat skeptical in order to be effective, since applicants who are eager to

make a good impression are likely to be tempted to embellish the truth or omit negative information altogether (Seyfarth, 2002). Good listening will help draw out factual information through solid questioning of responses. Finally, the interviewer must be able to listen well to be in control of the interview and to accomplish its purpose (Norton & Webb, 1998). That purpose is to hire the teacher who demonstrates the most thorough understanding of sound teaching practices and is most likely to become an efficient member of the learning environment. Building principals who are not sound managers of personnel and resources only exacerbate the problems of the school through their ineptitude.

Mentoring of new teachers has been done for years; only it was never recognized as such or mandated by law. Experienced teachers quite naturally took a younger teacher under their wing and helped them anyway they could. Certainly this was a valuable practice long before it became expected or mandated. Young teachers need someone to vent their frustrations with and share good and bad experiences with to help in getting through those first trying years of education. When conditions in the work environment prevent them from meeting their expectations, disappointment and frustration follow (Seyfarth, 2002). This statement precisely states why so many talented young teachers leave the field, teaching is hard work even for the best teachers.

Quality mentoring programs are expensive to develop and operate, but they have a high probability of retaining young teachers (Seyfarth, 2002). I

believe developing a solid mentoring program is one of the best things a district can do for the long-term success of both teachers and students. The new but struggling teacher that has a strong mentor is most likely going to be successful and will most likely become a solid educator and mentor for another young teacher. Part of being a good mentor involves providing solid, useful feedback that can be utilized by the young teacher. Feedback provides us with a way of knowing whether we are living up to expectations, if we are attaining goals, and how we can improve our performance (Thompson, 1996). Through productive feedback and reflective thought, young teachers can not only survive the early years, but also thrive as educators.

I believe all teachers want to be great teachers and help students learn, but some simply do not have all the skills necessary to be successful. Great content mastery means nothing when there is no relationship with students. Through careful hiring and mentoring of young teachers, schools can reach unheard of levels. All human beings strive to experience psychological success (Seyfarth, 2002). I firmly believe this. Unfortunately, the work environment in some schools does little to help employee's experiences psychological success (Seyfarth, 2002). Ultimately, school success comes down to a couple of simple things: hire good teachers; provide solid mentors and value the experiences they have to offer. If these goals can be accomplished, schools will thrive as the students flourish.

## **Standard 2: School Culture**

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development (Wilmore, 2002).

There is a subtle spirit that can be sensed the moment one walks into a school...that spirit is school culture (Robbins & Alvy, 1995). I believe this is a very accurate statement. To me, school culture is all the different relationships that occur both within and outside of the school, and how these relationships serve to motivate or separate a school. Schools that have a negative school culture have no vibrancy or excitement to them, everyday is the same, nothing new is ever done or attempted, and the halls are devoid of any example of student produced work. As a future principal one of my main goals will be to either build upon or enhance the positive culture in my building.

Teachers view the school through a lens that is often confined to their own classroom (Matthews & Crow, 2003). It is my responsibility as the leader of that school to widen that lens so that they may have a broader view of the organization as a whole. In this final section I will briefly state the role I believe school culture plays in each of the six licensing standards that administrators have.

Standard one relates to being the visionary leader for the school. Leaders are still considered by many to be the dominant larger-than-life heroes who

accomplish something significant, legendary, or new (Lyman, 2000). I believe that school culture is shaped by the history of a school but most importantly, a visionary leader takes that history and molds it to help formulate a vision of where the school should go, not where it has been. School culture also has a certain staying power. This stability can promote school change or it can inhibit it (Matthews & Crow, 2003). As the leader it is my duty to always promote positive change and growth. It is always great to honor and cherish old traditions, but I see nothing wrong with starting new traditions either.

Establishing a caring and nurturing school culture is the focus of the second standard. In order to do our job successfully it is vital that we understand the culture of our school before trying to change anything. Principals who are interested in school reform and improvement need to first understand the existing culture (Matthews & Crow, 2003). I do not believe that a principal should come in to a school and initiate sweeping change during the first year. I feel it takes at least one school year to learn and understand how the staff, students, and school operate. Sweeping reform done unsupported is doomed to failure. Without strong staff support many changes will not be successful. A strong leader understands this and builds trust and relationships before attempting to alter long-term practices.

It is very important that regardless of what is taking place outside of the school, the school culture must remain positive and clearly aimed at making the

school a better place for the students (Robbins & Alvy, 1995). I feel this statement perfectly summarizes the relationship between school culture and the third standard, which refers to a safe learning environment. For many students, school is the only calm, consistent and safe entity in their world on a daily basis. Regardless of outside activity, schools must focus on educating young people so that when they leave school they are better equipped to handle the challenges the world presents to them. The culture should emphasize that school is a community of learners and that all can learn from one another (Robbins & Alvy, 1995).

A school culture is often reflected in the culture of the neighborhood or town the school is located in. Having opportunities for collaboration with different community members or groups helps shape the culture of a school. School cultures cannot remain vibrant if they only emphasize the values and beliefs of the faculty and staff members and ignore the concerns of the community (Matthews & Crow, 2003). The focus of the fourth standard is community collaboration and school involvement. The activities of a school should not be a secret. Good schools share all the positive happenings and invite people in often. Good schools like to show off. Utilizing the many talents that the community offers certainly helps foster a positive school culture both inside and outside of school. The more people that become positively engaged with a school, the more dynamic and exciting that school can become. As principal, your role is to communicate the norms, values, beliefs and assumptions of the

school's culture to these individuals and groups. You will want to ensure their understanding of the school's culture and to enlist their support in the school's mission and vision (Matthews & Crow, 2003).

Integrity, ethics and fairness are the subject of the fifth standard. This one is simple: if leadership in a building does not act with these principles in mind, a negative culture will be the result. For example, some teachers may assume that students from high socio-economic backgrounds can learn quickly and others cannot. These teachers then act on those teaching assumptions by their teaching methods with these students. These assumptions can then permeate the entire school and affect its culture (Matthews & Crow, 2003). Treating all people with integrity and fairness will go a long ways in determining the culture that exists in a school. A school should celebrate and commemorate the importance of respecting one another regardless of race, religion, or gender (Robbins & Alvy, 1995). Operating in an ethical manner allows all people in a school to feel valued, respected and personally connected to the school.

Standard 6 deals with legal and political issues of school leadership. One way that negative school culture could affect a building is the open enrollment of its students to another building or district. When this occurs in Iowa, the money the state gives the school for that student then goes with that student to the new school or district. If this happens enough, the district will experience budget problems. When too many students are leaving a specific building, I would



expect the district to investigate the factors behind this problem. Of course there are many factors that come in to play, but I am sure that a negative school culture is one of the motives behind the move.

A second issue could involve test scores. With all schools having to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation, increased emphasis on standardized testing and the scores students generate is going to occur. In a struggling school more parents are likely to get involved at the district level to investigate why a school is not scoring where it needs to be. Obviously the district will look to the school leadership team to improve or changes will have to be made. Parents and teachers resist some schools caring reforms by pressuring for accountability framed as test score success (Lyman, 2000). Establishing and maintaining a positive school culture will be a key determinant in the success level reached by a school.

Certainly there are countless examples of how school culture affects a building. What I have done is provide examples that I thought were critical to the establishment of a positive school culture. Clearly a principal must be more than the mean guy in the office. It is very important for students to see the principal in a role other than the traditional one, the disciplinarian or the person in the office (Robbins & Alvy, 1995). A successful school leader must be visible and available to both staff and students and serve as the number one fan and cheerleader for the school. Ultimately, every aspect of the program should

emphasize quality, and all personnel should feel professional and personal pride as individuals and part of the group (Robbins & Alvy, 1995).

Ultimately, school leadership is about building relationships with everyone who comes through the school door. If the building leader is unable to fulfill that task, success is going to be a challenging prospect. Teachers will not support the leader, students will quickly pick up on that and then trouble will arise. A strong leader that can build relationships and motivate others to succeed is a prized possession. My goal throughout this entire program has been to observe, learn and gradually acquire the skills that will put in me in the best position to succeed as a school leader. I believe if I utilize the information contained on these pages and constantly strive to improve, my leadership career will be marked with much success and enjoyment.

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